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ABSTRACT

The uncritical acceptance of Plato's treatment of sophistic doctrines (specifically in Plato's dialogue the "Gorgias") in the university has resulted in an impoverished contemporary view of sophistic rhetoric. Since Socrates' foundational epistemology allows for the knowledge of immutable truth and Gorgias' relativistic epistemology does not, there is a differend between them. Had Plato presented Gorgias' epistemology and methodology accurately, as he does Socrates's, most fourth century B.C. Athenian citizens would have preferred Gorgias' arguments, since democracy depends on the ability to change the opinions of others and the willingness to allow personal own opinions to be changed. For the Athenian citizens to admit to the possibility of perfect knowledge--attainable only through the Platonic negative dialectic--would require them also to deny the validity of their own democratic power structure. Thus, in order to gain the approval of his democratic Athenian audience at a time when the Athenian democracy was in an unstable condition from struggles against bloody oligarchic tyrannies, Plato was forced to (mis)represent Gorgias' epistemology as allowing for the possibility of certain knowledge. Plato, therefore, creates a Gorgias with a foundational epistemology and an empirical, "doxa"-governed methodology, making Gorgias appear not only irrational, but also absurd. It is important to keep in mind that all of Plato's claims against Gorgias and rhetoric are mere fictions created by Plato for the purpose of controlling the differend between Socrates and Gorgias. (Thirteen references are attached.) (PRA)

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Plato's Critique of Rhetoric in the Gorgias (447a-466a): Epistemology, Methodology, and the Lyotardian Differend

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Plato's Critique of Rhetoric in the Gorgias (447a-466a):[1] Epistemology, Methodology, and the Lyotardian Differend

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Plato's disdain for sophistic doctrines, especially those concerning rhetoric, is no grand secret.[2] George Kerferd calls Plato's treatment of sophists in general "profoundly hostile" (1). Indeed, throughout the Platonic corpus, sophistic doctrines are criticized; and specifically in Plato's dialogue the Gorgias, Gorgias himself, the relativistic sophist from Leontini Sicily, is outright ridiculed. Yet, despite Plato's overt distrust of the sophists in general, and of Gorgias in particular, some recent scholars find no fault with Plato's treatment of Gorgian rhetoric in the early pages of the Gorgias. For example, in The Pre-Socratic Philosophers, Kathleen Freeman suggests that "the opinions on rhetoric attributed to [Gorgias] by Plato are probably genuine" (366). Similarly, Terence Irwin believes that, in the Gorgias, Plato is "trying to portray three historical characters [Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles], with their actual inconsistencies" (9). Unfortunately, such uncritical acceptance of Plato's treatment of sophistic doctrines has resulted in an impoverished contemporary view of sophistic rhetoric.

In order to demonstrate some of the problems with accepting Plato's representations of sophistic--specifically Gorgian--doctrines regarding rhetoric, I will first discuss the historical situation surrounding the publication of Plato's Gorgias, then I will discuss the Lyotardian differend between Gorgias and Socrates,

and finally, I will discuss why and how Plato (mis)represents the Leontinian sophist to serve his own purposes in the Gorgias.

The Historical Situation

When Plato wrote the Gorgias, the Athenian democracy was in an unstable condition. E. R. Dodds convincingly places the date of the Gorgias' composition at around 387 b.c. (24)--just twenty-four years after the tyranny of the Four Hundred and just seventeen years after the tyranny of the Thirty. Alcibiades and Critias, two of Socrates' most successful students, led the revolutions which resulted in these bloody oligarchic tyrannies; and their anti-democratic exploits contributed much to the Athenian death sentence against their mentor Socrates.[3]

According to Thucydides, in 411 b.c., Alcibiades persuaded many of the war-weary Athenian troops that he could arrange a peace treaty between Athens and their Spartan enemies. This peace treaty, however, would contain one necessary condition: that Athens restructure its democratic government into an oligarchic system of four hundred rulers (8.45-49). However, soon after the oligarchy took power, Alcibiades failed in his attempts to secure peace with the Spartan allies--they saw too many benefits in attacking war-weary Athens (8.70-71). As dissension from vocal democrats increased, the oligarchs began putting to death anyone who dared speak freely against the present government (8.72-73). Finally realizing the deceit Alcibiades used to gain power, the failure of his attempts at securing peace, and the brutality he employed to retain his power, the newly refreshed democratic sentiments of the Athenian

citizens led them to overthrow Alcibiades and his oligarchic colleagues. The bloody oligarchy was over, and Athens returned to democracy (8.74-81).

The tyranny of the Thirty in 404 b.c., led by Socrates' student Critias, was even more bloody than the tyranny of the four hundred in 411 b.c. As Xenophon tells us, having received several regimens of fresh troops from supportive Spartan allies, Critias and the other oligarchic tyrants set up a government of thirty rulers (with twenty-one powerful economic advisors) and 3,000 citizens--all other residents of Athens were allowed no legal rights whatsoever. Two fates often befell those middle and lower class residents of Athens who were not listed among the 3,051 citizens protected by the laws of the oligarchic government: many of them had their properties confiscated without recourse, and others were murdered for outwardly opposing the Thirty (Hellenica 2.3.11-21).

Having removed all legal rights from the middle and lower class residents of Athens, Critias and the rest of the thirty began to make more specific the ambiguous laws which Solon wrote for the Athenian democracy (Krentz 62); ambiguous laws require deliberation which empowers those who possess rhetorical skills over those with mere wealth and high birth. In fact, Critias was so leery of rhetorical prowess among the masses that he wrote a law forbidding all instruction in the art of language (Xenophon, Memorabilia 1.2.31). A few months after the forced installation of the oligarchic Thirty, Thrasybulus and about 70 other exiled Athenian democrats marched toward Athens and defeated the oligarchs despite their Spartan troops, killing many of the

Thirty, Critias among them, in battle (Hellenica 2.4.2-23). Athens again returned to democratic rule (Hellenica 2.4.24-43).

In democratic Athens, following 404 b.c., oligarchic, anti-rhetoric sentiment was treated with caution, as when Socrates was tried by Miletus for corrupting the youth of Athens--indeed, during the trial itself, Miletus mentioned the brutal oligarchs Alcibiades and Critias as the most prominent of these corrupted youth (Xenophon, Memorabilia 1.2.9-12). And soon after Socrates drank the hemlock, Plato, perhaps Socrates' most prominent student, began to challenge democracy--favoring, of course, oligarchy--and attacking rhetoric and its teachers.

In the Republic, Plato proposes a social and political hierarchy stratified into four levels: 1) the philosophic ruling few, 2) the military class which enforces the will of the philosopher-kings, 3) the middle class of traders and craftsmen, and 4) the common wage laborers (II.369b-383b, et passim). Plato's four class social and political system resembles Spartan oligarchic government as well as the oligarchies installed in Athens in 411 and 404 b.c. with the support of Spartan forces (see Aristotle's The Athenian Constitution, chapters 29-41).

Plato's desire for oligarchic government in Athens rested on his foundational epistemology; access to true knowledge was limited to those of wealth and high birth, and those few born with these qualities were the only legitimate candidates to be counted among the philosophic ruling few. The sophists, on the other hand, favored the Athenian democracy the way it was, and their desire for democracy rested on their relativistic epistemologies. They believed that all "knowledge" is opinion (doxa), and that all

laws and policies (nomoi) grow out of opinion. For many of the sophists, and especially Gorgias, these opinions are governed by language (logos). Thus, rhetoric supplies the necessary tools for mastery over opinion, and, consequently, the ability for anyone to function effectively in a democratic society. All people, claimed the sophists, are able to learn how collaboratively to govern a demos, and nobility of birth and high economic status were irrelevant.

The Differend

Between Plato and the sophists of his day, and Gorgias in particular, is what Jean-Francois Lyotard calls a "differend."[4] Lyotard suggests that all communicative situations involve four elements: an addressor, addressee, referent, and sense. In most communicative situations, the addressor, addressee, and referent are clear; in the Gorgias, they are Socrates, Gorgias, and "rhetoric," respectively. However, it is in the differing senses of the referent "rhetoric" between Gorgias and Socrates that the Lyotardian differend occurs. Gorgias' epistemology is relativistic, and so relies on an empirical method of persuasion, dependent on the socially constructed doxa, or opinion of his audiences. Socrates' epistemology, on the other hand, is foundational, and so relies on a negative-dialectical techne, guided by the pursuit of absolute truth.[5] Gorgias' sense of the referent "rhetoric" (as empirical and doxa-governed) is legitimate given his relativistic epistemology, just as Socrates' sense of the referent "rhetoric" (as negative-dialectical) is legitimate given his foundational epistemology. And, as Lyotard would

suggest, there is no chance that Gorgias and Socrates could have ever reconciled their dispute regarding their opposed senses of the referent "rhetoric."

Lyotard defines a differend as "a case of conflict between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments. One side's legitimacy does not imply the other's lack of legitimacy," and "applying a single rule of judgment to both [debating interlocutors] in order to settle their differend as though it were merely a litigation would wrong (at least) one of them" (xi). Rules of judgment in rhetoric grow out of each individual's epistemological bias. Thus, a judgment between Gorgias' relativistic, doxa-governed techne and Socrates' foundational, negative-dialectical techne would be determined primarily by the epistemology of the judge; a relativist (and a proponent of a democratic power structure) would rule in favor of Gorgias, and a foundationalist (and a proponent of an oligarchic power structure) would rule in favor of Socrates. However, applying a Socratic rule of judgment (that all valid rhetorics are negative-dialectical, for example) to Gorgias' and Socrates' debate would be unfair. Such a judgment would necessarily grow out of the judge's own foundational epistemological biases, and would not consider the relativistic epistemology which gave rise to Gorgias' techne. Yet Plato himself applies a Socratic rule of judgment to Gorgias and Socrates in the Gorgias through the way that he (mis)represents Gorgias' epistemology, and so he encourages all readers after him to judge Gorgias' notion of rhetoric in the same way that he did.

Plato's Manipulations of the Gorgian/Socratic Differend

In 387 b.c., had Plato published a dialogue accurately presenting Gorgias' beliefs about rhetoric in his dispute with Socrates, then there is little chance that the Athenian citizenry at that time would have judged in favor of Socrates. Most of the citizens of Athens in 387 b.c. were proponents of democracy, with the bitter memory of Socrates' students Alcibiades and Critias fresh in their minds. Thus, because audiences of disputes judge the interlocutors based on their own epistemological biases and because the dominant epistemological bias in 387 b.c. Athens was relativistic and supportive of a democratic power structure, Plato was forced to remove the differend between Socrates' foundational epistemology and Gorgias' relativistic epistemology by presenting Gorgias' techne or method as though it had arisen out of a foundational epistemology. Plato's purpose in this manipulation was to present Gorgias as a rhetorician with a foundational epistemology, so that his doxa-governed, empirical techne would seem absurd.

Plato accomplishes this epistemological shift for Gorgias through the binary opposition "certain knowledge vs. opinion." For Plato, certain knowledge and opinion exist simultaneously. In order for an utterance or thought to qualify as certain knowledge, it must exactly replicate an extralinguistic, atemporal, immutable image or form of truth. Opinion exists when the phenomenal world of perpetual flux blocks our ability to know truth.

But for Gorgias the sophist, all "knowledge" is opinion. In his Encomium on Helen, Gorgias writes,

> if all men on all subjects had <both> memory of things past and <awareness> of things present and foreknowledge of the future, speech would not be [as it presently is], since as things are now it is not easy for them to recall the past nor to consider the present nor to predict the future. So that on most subjects most men take opinion as counselor to their soul . . . (Kennedy DK 82 B11.11)

Gorgias argues that since perfect knowledge of the past, present, and future is impossible, then certain knowledge of anything is humanly impossible. And the majority of fifth century b.c. Athenian democrats would agree with Gorgias. If perfect knowledge of the past, present, and future were possible, there would be no need for public deliberative debates, nor would voting on proposed courses of action be useful--why vote when there is just one option.

But in order to criticize rhetoric and democracy within a dominantly democratic culture, Plato was forced to (mis)represent Gorgias as believing in the existence or possibility of certain knowledge. Plato writes,

> Socrates: . . . Is there a state which you call 'having learned'?
>
> Gorgias: There is.
>
> Socrates: And such a thing as 'having believed'?
>
> Gorgias: There is.
>
> Socrates: Now do you think that to have learned and to have believed, or knowledge and belief, are one and the same or different?

Gorgias: I consider them different, Socrates.

(454c-454d)

Plato's Gorgias agrees that knowledge and opinion simultaneously exist, and his assent to this point haunts him when Socrates asks him what sort of effect rhetoric has on its audience: Gorgias concedes that his techne merely creates belief, and does not provide knowledge of what is right and wrong (454d-454e). Thus, Plato's Gorgias allows Socrates to claim that Gorgian rhetoric is not a true art, a techne, because it does not refer to an immutable standard of truth.

Conclusion

Since Socrates' foundational epistemology allows for the knowledge of immutable truth and Gorgias' relativistic epistemology does not, there is a differend between them. Had Plato presented Gorgias' epistemology and methodology accurately, as he does Socrates', most fourth century b.c. Athenian citizens would have preferred Gorgias' arguments, since democracy depends on the ability to change the opinions of others and the willingness to allow one's own opinions to be changed. For the Athenian citizens to admit to the possibility of perfect knowledge--attainable only through the Platonic negative dialectic--would require them also to deny the validity of their own democratic power structure. Thus, in order to gain the approval of his democratic Athenian audience, Plato was forced to (mis)represent Gorgias' epistemology as allowing for the possibility of certain knowledge. Plato, therefore, creates a Gorgias with a foundational epistemology and an empirical, doxa-

governed methodology, making Gorgias appear not only irrational, but also absurd.

What we must keep in mind, though, is that all of Plato's claims against Gorgias and rhetoric are mere fictions created by Plato for the purpose of controlling the differend between Socrates and Gorgias.

Notes

1
In this essay, I will limit my discussion to the first movement of Plato's Gorgias, i.e. Socrates' and Gorgias' discussion regarding the nature of rhetoric.

2
Although I refer here to "the sophists" as a collective group, I recognize that their epistemologies and ideologies varied widely from individual to individual (in Sprague's The Older Sophists, compare Gorgias to Antiphon, or the anonymous Dissoi Logoi to the anonymous Iamblichi, for example). However, the relativistic, democratic sophists, I believe, outnumbered the foundational, oligarchic sophists. Thus, it is to these relativists, such as Gorgias, Protagoras, and the anonymous author of the Dissoi Logoi, that I refer when I use the term "sophists."

3
Although I oppose democracy and oligarchy in this essay, favoring, of course, the rule of the many, we must understand that fifth century b.c. Athenian democracy was by no means a utopian state. In fact, under democratic rule, Athens permitted institutionalized slavery; and women were denied the possibility for citizenship and were not allowed to vote on public issues. However, given the brutality of the rulers in the oligarchic Athenian governments in the fifth century b.c., it is no surprise that democracy was the favored form of government for most Athenian citizens.

4
Until recently, rhetorical and literary theory have been in what I would call a Platonic mode. However, with the transition from a product to process orientation in composition and from new criticism and structuralism to deconstruction and post-structuralism in literary criticism, these systems of language theory appear to be returning to a neo-sophistic epistemology. Lyotard, for example, in The Differend, acknowledges the intense force a particular historical situation, personal perspective, or epistemology can have on the form and content of communication. And since this sort of perspectival awareness is what many of the early Greek sophists taught, I find Lyotard's differend a supremely appropriate tool with which to critique Plato's arguments against sophistic rhetoric.

5
A "negative-dialectical techne" is based on a foundational epistemology. Negative dialectic involves a process of questions and answers used to remove the error created by the ever-changing physical world and the faulty human perceptions of this world, so that immutable truth in its essential, atemporal form may be uncovered and understood.

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